

The River

When the Colorado Burst Its Banks and Flooded the Imperial Valley of California

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CHAPTER XIX—Continued.

Marshall's voice halted them. "Men of the valley." The audience, swayed again, listened. "Hear me. The river's running away again down yonder. This is a message from Rickard. It's broken through the levee. It's started for the valley. Now, who's going to stop it? Can you? Where's your force, your equipment? Who can rush to that call but the company you are bounding? I gave you Faraday's message. His hand's on the table. Not another cent from him unless you withdraw those suits. You say you have given me your answer, Black's answer. Now the river plays a trick. It calls your bluff. Shall we stop the river, men of the valley? We can. Will you withdraw your suits? You can. What is your answer now, Imperial valley?"

The scene broke into bedlam. Men jumped to their chairs, to the velvet rim of the boxes, all talking, screaming, gesticulating at once. The Yellow Dragon was never so fearfully visualized. Out of the chaos of men's voices came a woman's shriek. "For God's sake, save our homes." It pitched the panic note. "Save the valley! Stop the river!"

Marshall's Indian eyes were reading that mass of scared faces as though it were a sheet of typed paper. "Barton," he called through the din. "Where's Barton?"

Two men lifted Barton's puny figure upon their shoulders. His vibrant voice rolled above the shouting. "The valley withdraws its suits against the company."

"Then the company," yelled Marshall's oratory, "the company withdraws the river from the valley!" Pandemonium was loose. There were cheers, and the sound of women sobbing. Barton was carried out on the shoulders of his henchmen. Black led a crowd out, haranguing to the street.

On the street, Marshall fell back to MacLean. "That was a neat trick the river threw in our hands." His voice had dropped from oratory; the de-

"We have all the home comforts, haven't we? Why shouldn't we be comfortable when we are to be here for months? I'm going to brave it out—to the bitter end, even if I bake. It is my duty—" She would make her intention perfectly clear! "There ought to be at least one cozy place, one soft nook that suggests a woman's presence. We have ten here in the afternoon, sometimes. Mr. Rickard drops in." The last was a delicate stroke.

"Afternoon ten? At the Front? Is this modern warfare?" The girl draped her irony with a smile.

Gerty was stealing a pensive survey in the mirror through the rough door that opened into the division called her bedroom. The sunburned, unconscious profile of Innes was close to her own. Pink and golden the head by the dark one. She looked younger even than Innes! Good humor returned to her.

"We are going to dine on the Delta tonight." She pinned up a "scolding lock," an ugly misnomer for her sunny clinging curls! The mirror was requisitioned again. "That's the name of the new dredge. It was christened three weeks ago, in champagne brought from Yuma."

"You said dine on the Delta. Do you mean they have meals there?"

"You should see it," cooed Gerty. "It's simply elegant. It's a floating hotel, has every convenience. The camp cook, Ling, has his hands full."

"Going to wear that?" They were standing now by the door of Gerty's dressing tent. Over the bed a white lingerie gown was spread.

"I live in them. It's so hot," shrugged Mrs. Hardin.

"I'll look like your maid, Gerty!" Innes' exclamation was rueful. "I didn't bring anything but khakis. Oh, yes! I remember throwing in, the last minute, two piques to fill up space."

"Why, we have dances on the Delta, and Sunday evening concerts. You knew the work at Laguna dam is being held up? The government men of the Reclamation Service are down here all the time. But it's time to be getting ready."

Later, Tom flatly refused to accompany them.

"I thought as much." Gerty shrugged an airy irresponsibility. Innes could detect no regret.

They passed a cot outside the tent. "Who sleeps there?"

"Tom." The eyes of the two women did not meet.

Innes made no comment. "He finds the tent stuffy." Gerty's lips were prim with reserve. They walked toward the river in silence. As they reached the encampment, Gerty recovered her vivacity.

"That's Mr. Rickard's office, that ramada. Isn't it quaint? And that's his tent; no, the other one. MacLean's is next; there's Junior, now."

But his eyes were too full of Innes to see Gerty's dimples. The difference in the quality of his greetings smote Gerty like a blow. And she had never considered Tom's sister attractive, as a possible rival. Yet, after a handshake, she saw that to MacLean, Jr., she did not exist.

Gerty was deeply piqued. Until now, the field had been hers. She might perhaps have to change her opinion of Tom's sister. Boys, she had to concede, the younger men, might find her attractive, boyishly congenial; older men would fall to see a charm!

The arrangement at table annoyed Gerty. The boss, MacLean explained gaily, would not be there for dinner. He might come in later. Two men from the Reclamation Service tried to entertain Mrs. Hardin.

"It isn't a battle," Innes looked around the gay rectangle. "It's play!"

The thought followed her that evening. Outside, where the moonlight was silencing the deck, and the quiet river lapped the sides of the dredge, Jose's strings, and his "amigo's" throbbing from a dark corner, made the illusion of peace convincing. This was no battle. It was easy to believe herself again at Mare Island—the Delta a cruiser.

Later, Gerty passed her, two-stepping divinely, before her partner turned his head, Innes recognized the stiff back and straight poised head and dancing step of Rickard. She admitted he had distinction, grudgingly. She could not think of him except comparatively; always antithetically, balanced against her Tom.

"I'm tired; let's rest here." Innes drew into the shadow of the great arm of the dredge. They watched the dancers as they passed, MacLean playing the woman in "Pete's" arms, Gerty with Rickard, two other masculine couples. The Hardins were the only women aboard.

It was because of Tom that Innes felt resentment when the uplifted appealing chin, the lace ruffles fluttered by. Tom, lying outside an unfriendly tent!

It was easy, in that uncertain light, to avoid Rickard's glance of recognition. Estrada, who had come aboard with the manager, sought her out, and then Crothers of the O. P. Again, she saw Rickard dancing with the lingerie gown. There seemed to be no attempt to cover Gerty's preference; for Rick-

ard, she was the only woman there! Because she was Tom's sister, she had a right to resent it, to refuse to meet his eye. Small wonder Tom did not come to the Delta!

Going in with MacLean, Jr., to the messroom for a glass of water, she met Rickard, on his way out. She managed to avoid shaking hands with him. She wondered why she had consented to give him the next waltz.

"He'll not find me," she determined. MacLean followed her gladly to the dark corner of the deck where Jose's guitar was then syncoating an accompaniment to his "amigo's" voice.

To her surprise, Rickard penetrated her curtain of shadows.

"Our dance, Miss Hardin? Give us 'Sobr' Las Olas,' again, Jose."

The hand that barely touched his arm was stiff with antagonism. She told herself that he had to dance with her—politeness, conventionality, demanded it. But, instantly, she forgot her resentment, and forgot their awkward relation. It was his dancing, not Gerty's, then, that was "superb." Anybody could find skill under the leadership of that irresistible step. And then the motion claimed her. She thought of nothing; they moved as one to the liquid falling beat.

The music dropped them suddenly, solating them at the stern of the deck. The silence was complete. Rickard broke it to ask her what she thought of the camp.

Her resentments were recalled. She blundered through her impression of the lightness, the gaiety.

"A work camp does not have to be solemn. You'll find all the grimness you want if you look beneath the surface."

The guitars were tuning up. "Shall I take you back? I have this dance with your sister."

She thought of Tom—on his lonely cot outside his tent. She forgot that he had been asked a question. He was dancing again with Gerty! If that silly little woman had no scruples, no fine feeling, this man should at least guard her. If he had been her lover, he should be careful; he must see that people were talking of them. She had seen the glances that evening! The business relation between the two men should suggest tact, if not decency! It was outrageous.

Rickard stood waiting to be dismissed; puzzled. Through the uncertain light, her anger came to him. She looked taller, older; there was a flame of accusing passion in her eyes.

It was his minute of revelation. So that was what the camp thought! The wife of Hardin—Hardin! Why, they were only polite to her—they were old friends. What had he said to call down this sudden scorn? "Dancing—again—? Had he been all kinds of an ass?"

"My turn, Miss Innes!" demanded MacLean, Jr.

"Oh, yes," she cried, relief in her tone.

Rickard did not claim his dance with Mrs. Hardin. He stood where the girl had left him, thinking. A few minutes later, Gerty swept by in the arms of Breck. Later, came Innes with Junior; the two, thinking themselves unseen, romping through a two-step like two young children. He was never shown that side of her. Gay as a young kitten, chatting merrily with MacLean! Should her eyes discover him, she would be again the haughty young woman!

He'd gone out of his way to be polite to the wife of Hardin. What did he care what they thought? He'd finish his job, and get out.

A minute later, he was being rowed back to camp.

CHAPTER XXI.

A Complete Camp.

"Complete, isn't it?" Estrada was leading Innes Hardin through the engineers' quarters.

"Yes, it's complete!"

Her Brother had told her a breakfast that morning how grandly they had been wasting time! She would not let herself admire the precision of the arrangements, the showers back of the white men's quarters, the mesquite-shaded kitchen. Gerty's elaborate settling was of a piece, it would seem, with the new management. House-keeping, not fighting, then, the new order of things!

Tom was afe to get his gate done. She knew what it meant to him; to the valley. The flood waters had to be controlled. That depended, Tom had proved to her, on the gate. And the men dance and play house, as if they were children, and every day counting!

She thought she was keeping her accusations to herself, but Estrada was watching her face.

"We are here, you know, for a stage. There are months of work ahead, hot months, hard months. The men have got to be kept well and contented. We can't lose any time by sickness—" He wanted to add "and dissensions." The split camp was painful to him, an Estrada. "Even after we finish the gate, if we do finish it—"

She wheeled on him, her eyes gleaming like deep yellow jewels. "You've never thought we could finish it!"

Estrada hesitated over his answer. "You are a friend of Tom's, Mr. Estrada?"

"Surely! But I am also an admirer of Mr. Rickard. I mean of his methods. I can never forget the levee."

She had to acknowledge that Rickard had scored there. And the burning of the machinery had left a wound that she still must salve.

"You have no confidence in the gate?"

"The conditions have changed," urged Estrada. "You've seen the mess-

an inauspicious day for Mrs. Hardin's visit. Things had gone wrong. Vexations were piling up. A tilt with Hardin that morning, a telegram from Marshall; he was feeling sore. Desperately they needed labor. Wooster had just reported, venomously, it appeared to Rickard's spleen, increasing drunkenness among the Indians.

Gerty's ruffles swept in. Her dress, the blue mull with the lace medallions, accented the hue of her eyes, and looked deliciously cool that glaring desert day. Her parasol, of pounce, was lined with the same baby hue. Her dainty fairness and childish affability should have made an oasis in that strenuous day, but Rickard's disintegration of temper was too complete. He rose stiffly to meet her, and his manner demanded her errand.

She told it to him, plaintively. Her eyes were appealing, infantile. Would it be too much to ask, would Mr. Rickard mind in the least, he must be perfectly frank and tell her if they would be in the way at all, but while this hot spell lasted, could they, the three of them, eat in the mess tent with the men?

"Surely!" Rickard met it heartily. She would find it rough, but if she could stand it, yes, he thought it a good idea.

And then there was nothing for her to do but go. Her retreat was graceful, without haste, dignified. She smiled a farewell at MacLean, who was watching the approach of Innes Hardin and Estrada. Rickard did not see the aborted entrance of Hardin's sister and the young Mexican. He was itching to be at his work.

He let out a growl when Mrs. Hardin was out of earshot.

"Shucks! What in Halifax do women come to a place like this for? There's Hardin—brings in two women to cook for him, and now, please may they all eat with the men?"

His secretary subdued a chuckle. He was visualizing a procession of boxes of choice Havapas—from Bodefeldt, Hamlin and the rest of the gang. He need not buy a smoke for a year.

Rickard threw himself back in his chair. "Take this letter, MacLean. To Marshall." Then his worry diverted him. "Who in thunder is selling liquor to my Indians?"

"Hold on; that letter can wait. You get the horses up, MacLean, and we'll ride down to Maldonado's. It's his place to stop this liquor business, not mine."

A few hours later they were approaching the adobe walls of Maldonado. They found the gate locked. A woman, whose beauty had faded into a tragic whisp, a ghastly twilight of suggestion, came to their knock, and unbarred the gate for the white strangers. Mystery hung over the inclosure like a pall.

Rickard told his errand. Maldonado sputtered and swore. By the mother of Mary the Virgin, that thing would be stopped. He showed to the seniors, with pride, his badge. He was a ruffian; he was there to uphold the law. He had caught some of those drunken Indians on the road. He had brought them here.

Maldonado showed three men in a locked shed, deep in drunken stupor. He thought the liquor was obtained somewhere back in the sandhills. He would find the place. But the senior must be patient; his hands were so full.

Both men were glad to get away from the place and Maldonado. Obviously he was a brute; undoubtedly he was a liar.

CHAPTER XXIII.

A White Woman and a Brown.

For a few weeks Mrs. Hardin found the mess tent diverting. Before the Delta had expanded the capacity of the camp her soft nook had been overtaken, her hospitality strained. The men of the reclamation service, thrown into temporary inactivity, were eager to accept the opportunity created for another. Failing that other, her zeal had flagged. Events were moving quickly at the break; Rickard was absorbed. Mrs. Hardin told herself that it was the heat she wished to escape; not to her own ear did she whisper that she was following Rickard, not that the percolator and chafing dish, her shelves and toy kitchen were a wasted effort. She kept on good terms with herself by ignoring self-confidences.

Rickard, the discovery unfolded slowly, took his meals irregularly. His breakfast was gulped down before the women appeared; his dinners where he found them.

"No wonder!" reflected Gerty Hardin. "Ling's cooking is so bad." Small wonder the manager foraged for his meals.

She worked out a mission as she lay across her bed that hot afternoon. Her duty became so clear that she could no longer lie still. Immediately she must retrieve her weeks of idleness; what must Rickard think of her? She buttoned herself thoughtfully into a frock of pale colored muslin, cream slipping toward canopy. White was too glaring on a red-hot day like this.



She Waved Her Hand Gaily.



Gerty Welcomed Her Stiffly.

claiming fire was gone from the black eyes. "It's only a break in the levee. Rickard says he can control it; estimates two weeks or so. It may cost the O. P. a few thousand dollars, but it saved them half a million. Now we'll have that game of poker, MacLean!"

In the balcony, Hardin was staring at Brandon.

"If that wasn't the devil's own luck!"

CHAPTER XX.

A Soft Nook.

Innes traveled, gleefully, in a canoe, from Hamlin Junction to the Heading. She could not stay away a day longer! Never before had Los Angeles been a discipline. Why had it fretted her, made her restless, homesick? Then she had discovered the reason; history was going on down yonder. Going on, without her. She knew that that was what was pulling her; that only!

The exodus of engineers had started riverward in July. Gerty went with Tom, and she had made it distinctly clear that it was not necessary for Innes to follow them. Ridiculous for two women to coddle a Tom Hardin! Unless Innes had a special interest!

Her pride had kept her away. But Tom did not write; Gerty's letters were social and unsatisfactory; the newspaper reports inflamed her. The day before she had wired Tom that she was coming. She had to be there at the end!

Gerty welcomed her stiffly. Assuming a conscientious hostess-ship, she caught fire at her waning enthusiasms.

Gerty looked younger and prettier. Her flush accentuated her childish features which were smiling down her annoyance over this uninvited visit.

Pink was too hot, blue too definite. A parasol of pastel green, and she looked like a sprig of fragrant mignonette.

She found the open space of the trapezium swarming with strange dark faces. So silent their coming she had not heard the arrival of the tribes. She isolated the Cocopahs, stately as bronze statues, their long hair streaming, or wound mud-caked under the brilliant headcloths. Foregathered with them were men of other tribes; these must be the Yumas and Degulnos, the men needed on the river. These were the men who were to work on the rafts, weave the great mattresses. A squad of short-haired Pimas with their squaws and babies and their gaudy bundles, gaped at the fair-haired woman as she passed. The central space was filling up with Pimas and Maricopas, Papagoes, too; she knew them collectively by their show hair. These were brush cutters. This, then, meant the beginning of real activity. Tom would at last be satisfied. He would no longer sulk and rage alternately at the hold-up of the work.

Before she reached Rickard's ramada she saw that another woman was there. She caught an impassioned gesture. Her only surmise rested on Innes. Gerty saw that she was dark; she looked the halfbreed. The brown woman drew back as the white woman entered. Gerty smiled an airy reassurance. She herself would wait. She did not want to be hurried. She told Rickard that she had plenty of time.

"There is something you want to tell me?" Rickard's patience was courteous but firm. He would hear her errand first. Gerty, remembering the imploring attitude of the stranger, determined that she would not be sent away.

"Will you excuse me, senora? It will be only a minute."

She was to tell her errand, and briefly! Gerty swept past the intruder. "Sit down, Mrs. Hardin."

Resenting the inflection, she said she would stand. Her voice was a little hard, her eyes were veiled, as she told her mission. Her usual fluency dragged; she felt a lack of sympathy. In short, she proposed a commissary department, herself in charge.

"I'd like to feel I was of some use," urged Gerty. "My heart is bound up in this undertaking; if I'm allowed to stay, I'd like to help along. This is the only way I can, the woman's way."

"Aren't you taking a good deal on yourself, Mrs. Hardin?"

Then she forgave his hesitation quite, as it was of her he was thinking. "Not if it helps." Her voice was low and soft, as if this were a secret between them.

"Why, of course, anything you want, Mrs. Hardin." And, remembering her former position, he added, "The camp's yours as much as mine."

A glad smile rewarded him. She went out, reluctantly. There was a new significance in MacLean's absence from the ramada. What could that woman have to say that MacLean must not hear? For the first time the weak tenure on her old lover came to her. Not a sign had he yet given of their understanding, of the piquant situation. Themselves old sweethearts, thrown together in this wilderness. What had she built her hopes on? A word here, a translated phrase, or magnified glance. She would not harbor the new worry. Why, it would be all right. In the meantime she would show them all what a woman with executive ability could do.

"Sit down, senora," said Rickard to the brown woman, Maldonado's wife. "Don't be frightened. We won't let him hurt you." Rickard vulgarized his Castilian to the reach of her rude dialect. Familiar as was Rickard with the peons' speech in their own coun-



A Woman Unbarred the Gate.

try, he could not keep up with her story. Lurid words ran past his ears. Out of the jumble of abuse, of shame and misery he caught a new note.

"You say Maldonado himself sells liquor to the Indians?"

"Ssh, senora!" Someone might hear him! She looked over a terrified shoulder. That had slipped out, the selling of the liquor. She could have told her story without that; she wanted to deny it. Relentlessly Rickard made her repeat it, acknowledging the truth.

"What makes you tell me now?" Rickard hunted for the ulcer. He knew there was a personal wrong.

"What has Maldonado been doing to you? Has he left you?"

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

The consumption of newspaper paper by the daily, weekly and monthly publications of Australia runs about 4,000 tons a month.